

OCTOBER 6, 1978

LEBANON

ANNCR:

THE SIMMERING CONFLICT BETWEEN SYRIA AND LEBANON'S MILITANT CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS HAS FINALLY ERUPTED INTO FULL SCALE WARFARE. THE VIOLENCE NOW AT A CLIMAX DATES BACK TO FEBRUARY OF THIS YEAR, BUT ITS ROOTS GO DEEPER STILL. DOUGLAS ROBERTS HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM THE V.O.A. MIDDLE EAST BUREAU. VOICE:

WHEN THE SYRIAN-DOMINATED ARAB PEACE-KEEPING FORCE MOVED IN BETWEEN THE CIVIL WAR LINES ALMOST TWO YEARS AGO, CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN AND POLITICAL LEADERS WERE TALKING AND ACTING AS THOUGH THEY HAD WON THE FACTIONAL WAR. BUT, VIRTUALLY EVERYONE ELSE IN THE COUNTRY -- PALESTINIANS INCLUDED -- SAW SYRIA AS THE FORCE THAT QUASHED THE INTERNECINE FIGHTING. MILITANT CHRISTIAN LEADERS APPLAUDED SYRIAN PATROLS IN MOSLEM-DOMINATED WEST BEIRUT, ESPECIALLY AROUND PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS. BUT THEY SAW NO NEED FOR SYRIAN SOLDIERS TO PATROL CHRISTIAN DISTRICTS OF THE CAPITAL. THE MILITIA LEADERS WANTED "AUTO-SECURITY," A WELL-WORN PHASE IN CHRISTIAN-LEBANESE CIRCLES, MEANING THAT MILITIAMEN, NOT SYRIAN SOLDIERS, MAINTAIN LAW AND ORDER IN CHRISTIAN AREAS.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, LEBANESE LEFTIST AND MOSLEM AS WELL AS PALESTINIAN LEADERS SAW THE ISSUE DIFFERENTLY. SO DID THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT, AND SO DID SYRIA. THERE WERE DIFFERENCES OVER AN AMAZING VARIETY OF OTHER ISSUES AS WELL, RANGING FROM THE FUTURE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF LEBANON, AND THE REFORMATION OF ITS ARMY, TO THE STATE'S TAXATION AUTHORITY, AND ITS POWERS TO GRANT BUILDING PERMITS. IN ALL OF THESE LESSER ARGUMENTS AS WELL AS THE MAIN

CONFRONTATION, THE BEIRUT GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN CAUGHT SQUARELY IN THE MIDDLE. PRESIDENT SARKIS HAS MANY DETRACTORS IN LEBANON, BUT SOME LEBANESE DESCRIBED HIM AS VIRTUALLY THE ONLY SYMBOL OF UNITY LEFT IN THE COUNTRY.

FOR THE FIRST FIFTEEN MONTHS AFTER THE PEACE-KEEPING FORCE MOVED IN, THERE WAS COMPARATIVE CALM -- COMPARATIVE ON LEBANESE STANDARDS AT ANY RATE. THERE WERE OCCASIONAL GUN BATTLES IN BEIRUT AND OTHER CITIES AND LONG MONTHS OF FACTIONAL WARFARE IN THE SOUTH OF THE COUNTRY. IN BEIRUT, RELATIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN LEADERS AND SYRIA GRADUALLY DETERIORATED. AND CHRISTIAN RANKS SPLIT WHEN FORMER PRESIDENT SULEIMAN FRANJIEH RENOUNCED HIS ALLIANCE WITH THE MILITANT CHRISTIAN FRONT. BUT EVEN BEFORE THEN, RELATIONS BETWEEN DAMASCUS AND THE MILITIA LEADERS HAD BROKEN DOWN INTO VIOLENCE.

AFTER AN INCIDENT AT A LEBANESE ARMY BARRACKS IN FEBRUARY OF THIS YEAR, CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN TOOK TO THE STREETS IN BATTLES WITH SYRIAN REGULARS. THAT WAS THE FIRST IN A LONG SERIES OF OUTBREAKS THAT LED TO THE WARFARE OF TODAY. CHRISTIAN LEADERS CLAIMED THAT SYRIA IS TRYING TO DOMINATE LEBANON, WHILE THE DAMASCUS GOVERNMENT CONDEMNS THE GROWING ALLIANCE BETWEEN SOME MILITIA LEADERS AND ISRAEL, AN ALLIANCE THAT BROUGHT ALONG THE THREAT OF ISRAELI INTERVENTION. NONE OF THE MILITIA LEADERS CLAIM TO BE ABLE TO DEFEAT THE SYRIAN ARMY, BUT THEY DO CLAIM TO BE ABLE TO HOLD OFF SYRIAN ATTACKS.

HOW LONG THE VIOLENCE WILL LAST IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT. PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE LEADERS OF FRANCE AND SEVERAL ARAB COUNTRIES HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN DIPLOMATIC CONSULTATIONS ON WAYS TO HALT THE BLOODSHED. SYRIA'S PRESIDENT ASSAD HAS JUST COMPLETED TALKS WITH PRESIDENT BREZHNEV AND OTHER SOVIET LEADERS.

THEIR FINAL COMMUNIQUE FOCUSSED ON A CONDEMNATION OF THE CAMP DAVID ACCORDS AND LEBANON WAS HARDLY MENTIONED. BUT FEW OBSERVERS DOUBT THAT THE SITUATION WAS A PRIME TOPIC OF DISCUSSION IN MOSCOW.

WJL/RCS